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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effect of humor on the perceived credibility, character, and authority of an advertisement and on the recall of that advertisement. Two groups of subjects each heard two radio spot announcements, one humorous and one serious. Two different products were advertised, so that the first group of subjects, 117 college advertising students, were exposed to a serious commercial for one product and a humorous spot for the other, while the second group, 132 students, heard the opposite. The humorous and serious versions of each advertisement were identical in situation, product information, basic sales appeal, and number of times the product name and slogan were mentioned. Subjects then filled out a questionnaire that solicited information on their perception of the commercials' credibility, authoritativeness, and character, as well as their retention of the message. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between the two groups for each ad on the perceived humor of the message, however, no difference in the subjects' ability to recall copy points was found between the humorous and serious messages. Subjects rated the serious versions more credible than the humorous versions. The results suggest that the use of humor will have little effect on recall, and that a serious message is likely to be judged more credible and to have more authority than a humorous ad. (HTH)

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# THE EFFECT OF HUMOR ON ADVERTISING CREDIBILITY AND RECALL

a paper presented to the

ADVERTISING DIVISION

of the

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# THE EFFECT OF HUMOR ON ADVERTISING CREDIBILITY & RECALL

Research on the effectiveness of humor in advertising is almost as incongruous as the incongruity inherent in the humor itself. Yet, advertisers continue to employ humor in their campaigns, apparently with some success. For instance, campaigns for Alka-Seltzer, Blue Nun wine, Benson and Hedges, Volkswagen, Dr. Pepper and Xerox copiers are frequently cited as cases where humor proved effective (Dunn, 1982 and Ray, 1982). Still other campaigns, such as those for Quaker Oats, Betty Crocker rice, Piels and Rheingold beer, and the Horn and Hardart restaurant chain, are frequently cited as failures because of their use of humor (Weingarten, 1967).

Many practitioners favor the use of humor in advertising. Anthony Chevins, President, Cunningham and Walsh (Chevins, 1981, p. 22), defends the use of humor on the basis of its empathetic-like, universal appeal:

> There really isn't much of anything you can't sell with humor. No matter what the target audience is, ... no matter what the demographics are, ... the chances are that for the most part the people you are trying to reach are human.
>
> Most humans like to laugh. When you leave them laughing, the chances that you are someone they want to like and really want to do business with and--most important of all--buy your product.

Thus, greater persuasion may ensue from the favorable attitude and rapport produced by a humorous context. Others support the use of humor because humorous ads may take longer to "get on one's nerves" than serious ones which, because of "their constant badgering," may produce resentment and, hence, and unfavorable attitude toward the product being advertised (Cantor & Venus, 1980, p. 21)

On the other hand, critics of the use of humor in persuasive communications supply equally convincing arguments. Claude Hopkins, considered by many the father of modern advertising, denounced the use of humor, claiming, "People

do not buy from clowns," (Chevins, 1981, p. 22). Rosser Reeves described copy-writers using humor as a "group of dreaming, frustrated literary people who want to have fun with words regardless of what it does to their sponsor's sales," (Kelly & Solomon, 1975, p. 31).

Most critics of humor in advertising concur that humor may tend to entertain more than sell and should therefore be avoided. (Weingarten, 1967) Humor may detract from the real selling information by focusing attention to itself rather than the message it is designed to convey. As Weingarten (1967, pp. 27-28) explains,

> The problem is that the humorous, understated maverick point of view often obfuscates the content as the heavy emphasis on presentation gets in the way of the product.

There is the chance, then, that while humor may improve attention, it may decrease comprehension and overall message reception (Sternthal & Craig, 1973).

Despite these opposing arguments, humor continues to be used in advertising. It continues to be used to take advantage of the following theorized effects of humor:

1. Humor attracts attention and holds the audience (Ray, 1982; Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Phillips, 1968; Cantor & Venue, 1980).
2. Humor creates a relaxed, positive mood which will improve liking for the product being advertised (Sternthal & Craig, 1973; Ray, 1982; and Zeigler, 1981).
3. Because the advertiser is seen as willing to laugh about the product, the advertisement is perceived as more honest (Ray, 1982).
4. Because humor makes a message more memorable, it will be acted upon for a longer period of time (Gruner, 1976).
5. Because humor acts as a distractor, counterargument is inhibited, resulting in increased persuasion (Sternthal & Craig, 1973).

## EXISTING EVIDENCE ON THE EFFECTS OF HUMOR

Results of research on the effectiveness of humor are as contradictory as the opinions on its use. Two of the major areas of emphasis in research on humor have been retention (recall) and source perception. In these studies, humor has been operationalized in the context of textbooks, speeches, lectures, and broadcast and print advertisements.

### Recall

In sixteen studies conducted between 1961 and 1981 by various researchers, only three studies found evidence that humorous messages increased retention of the message (Gibb, 1964; Kaplan & Pascoe, 1977; Zillmann et. al., 1980). majority (9) found no difference in the audiences' ability to recall the message between a serious presentation and a humorous presentation (Bryant, 1981; Gruner, 1967b & 1970; Kennedy, 1970 & 1972a; Kilpela, 1961; Markeiwicz, 1972a; Perreault, 1972; Taylor, 1964). Four studies found that humor had a negative effect on recall of the message (Cantor & Venus, 1980; Markiewicz, 1972b & 1973b; Taylor, 1972).

### Source Perception

Between 1967 and 1981, fourteen studies examined the effect of humor on the audiences' perception of the source. The dependent variable ranged in operations from source character (e.g., Gruner, 1967 & 1970) to safety, qualification, and dynamism (Berlo, 1969-1970). Seven of these studies found evidence that humor has a positive effect on source perception (Gruner, 1967b & 1970; Kennedy, 1972a & 1972b; Markiewicz, 1972a & 1973a; Zillmann et. al. Williams, 1980). Four studies (Cantor & Venus, 1980; Lampton, 1971; Markiewicz, 1972b; McGown, 1967) found no difference and three (Bryant, 1981; Markiewicz, 1973b; Taylor, 1972) found humor had a negative effect on source perception.

The results of these studies on humor suggest that the effect of humor on recall is still unclear. In some cases humor in advertising may depress recall while in other cases it may enhance recall. And, in others, it probably doesn't matter whether one selects a humorous or serious approach.

While the results of the source perceptions studies can be utilized in planning advertisements employing testimonials or single spokespersons, they are not so readily applicable to other types of advertisements. The question of these studies was "How credible was the source?". The question, "How credible was the message?", needs to be answered.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to put the following questions to an empirical test:

1. What is the effect of humor on the perceived credibility of an advertisement?
2. What is the effect of humor on the perceived character of an advertisement?
3. What is the effect of humor on the perceived authority of an advertisement?
4. What is the effect of humor on recall of an advertisement?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A post test only, with control experimental design was used. Two groups of subjects each heard two radio spots, one humorous and one serious. Two different products were advertised, so that one group of subjects were exposed to a serious commercial for one product and a humorous spot for another, while the second group heard the opposite, as indicated in the diagram below:

| | Group 1 | Group 2 |
|---|---|---|
| Product A Newsline | Serious | Humorous |
| Product B National Semiconductor | Humorous | Serious |

### Sample

Subjects exposed to the Newsline spots were 153 female and 96 male undergraduate advertising students at the University of Florida. Thus, the total sample consisted of 249 subjects with 117 students in one group and 132 students in the other. The National Semiconductor sample consisted of 213 subjects (128 females & 85 males) with 100 in group one and 113 in group two.

### Stimuli

To assure that the humorous radio commercials used in the experiments would actually be perceived as humorous, in a pretest, 15 upper class advertising students rank ordered five 60-second humorous radio commercials. The two spots with the highest ratings then served as the experimental instruments.

The two products advertised in these spots were Time magazine and National Semiconductor digital watches. However, because it was assumed that most students were already familiar with Time magazine and would therefore have previously developed certain impressions and attitudes about it, the magazine's name was changed to Newsline, a fictitous magazine used in a previous experiment conducted by Cantor

and Venus (1980). National Semiconductor, on the other hand, was not renamed since it was not such a well-known brand. However, it was necessary on the National Semiconductor questionnaire to gauge familiarity with the product and discard those respondents who indicated they were acquainted with the National Semiconductor name.

Two nonhumorous 60-second spots were written to parallel the humorous commercials. The humorous and serious versions for each product were identical in situation, product information, basic sales appeal, and number of times product name and slogan were mentioned. All four spots were then professionally produced at a local radio station. (See Appendix 1 for copies of each spot.)

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire design combined elements of tests formerly employed by both Cantor and Venus (1980) and Charles Gruner (1967b and 1970). Identical for all groups, the questionnaire consisted of three pages, the first soliciting basic demographic data, such as age and sex.

The second page contained questions regarding the Newsline spot. The first four inquiries were designed to measure retention. Of these, two were open-ended requesting the name of the magazine and its slogan. These were followed by two multiple choice questions concerning specific features and overall sales message. Next, to establish that the humorous version was actually perceived as humorous and significantly more so than the nonhumorous version, subjects were asked to rate the commercial on a seven-point semantic scale from "humorous" to "not humorous."

To measure subjects' perception of the commercial's credibility, McCroskey's semantic differential scales (also used by Gruner) measuring the dimensions of "character" and "authoritativeness" were then adapted for the purpose of the present experiment and included. Whereas McCroskey derived 12 factors for measuring source credibility, only nine of these were judged appropriate in evaluating

the nature of an ad as opposed to the personal attributes of a public speaker. The three scales omitted in the present study were "Qualified-Unqualified," "Unselfish-Selfish," and "Virtuous-Sinful." Also, the "Informed-Uninformed" scale was modified to more aptly pertain to an ad and became "Informative-Uninformative." The resulting nine factors included in the questionnaire were as follows:

Semantic Differential Scales

Authoritativeness

1. Reliable-Unreliable
2. Informative-Uninformative
3. Intelligent-Unintelligent
4. Valuable-Worthless
5. Expert-Inexpert

Character

1. Honest-Dishonest
2. Friendly-Unfriendly
3. Pleasant-Unpleasant
4. Nice-Awful

The order and direction of the scales were randomized.

The third page began with five questions designed to measure retention of the National Semiconductor spot. Like page two, the first two questions requested subjects to recall the name of the product and its slogan. The next three multiple choice questions pertained to specific features and characteristics of the watch. The remainder of page three of the questionnaire was identical to page two with one exception: an inquiry at the end of the questionnaire asked subjects to indicate familiarity with this watch brand.

Procedure

Prior to playing the commercial, both groups were briefly instructed to listen to two radio spots. Neither group was informed of the intent of the experiment or the nature of the test to follow.

The first group heard the serious commercial for Newsline and the humorous National Semiconductor spot. The second heard the humorous version of Newsline and

serious National Semiconductor. Thus, one group heard a serious commercial first, while the other, a humorous spot first. Varying the presentation of the humor in this way controlled for the possible introduction of bias which may have resulted from consistently placing the humor either first or last.

Once the commercials were presented, questionnaires were disseminated, completed, and returned to the experimenter.

## Data Processing

Responses were coded, with open-ended questions receiving a "2" for an entirely correct response, a "1" for a partially correct response, and a "0" for an entirely incorrect response, or no response at all. Multiple choice questions were coded "2" for correct, "1" for incorrect, and "0" for "don't know." Semantic differentials were coded on a scale from 1-7, with "1" always the least favorable, least humorous, or least positive factor.

Data were then key punched for computer analysis.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to perform general frequency calculations and cross-tabulation of selected variables. The t-test was performed to determine statistical difference between means. A .05 alpha level was considered acceptable for statistical significance.

## Limitations

One major limitation of this experiment stems from the nature of the sample, which prevents generalizing results to any population other than that comprised of college students. Also, there was no random selection nor random assignment of subjects. Because subjects were advertising students, it is probable they were more sensitive to certain aspects of the ads, such as product name and slogan, and therefore were more inclined to recall them.

Also, the unnatural conditions imposed by the experimental procedure further impair the study's applicability. For instance, whereas radio commercials are usually

used as background while a listener is engaged in other activities, in this experiment the attention of the audience was fully devoted to the commercials, and there was no distraction to impede listening.

Furthermore, no attempt was made to distinguish between types of humor employed. While the humor in the two humorous spots manipulated here might best be classified as "absurd," no conclusions are intended based on this particular kind of humor.

Product type is another limitation. Purchase of a news magazine or digital watch may involve the consumer to a greater or lesser extent than other product types; thus, generalizing results to other product categories may not be possible.

This particular experiment also fails to consider the long-term effects on advertising credibility and recall.

A longitudinal study considering the effects of exposure to a commercial over a longer period of time might yield quite different results.

## RESULTS

Before analysis of the data was accomplished, a check to assure the subjects perceived the treatment messages as humorous and serious was completed. Table 1 shows the results of a t-test which indicated there was a significant difference between the two groups for each ad on the perceived humor of the message. Subjects perceived the messages designed to be humorous as more humorous than the serious versions.

Table 1: Perceived Humor in Treatment Advertisements

| | Experimental Group-Humorous Ad | Control Group-Serious Ad | t | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newsline | 0.96 | -0.76 | -8.36 | $p < .05$ |
| National Semiconductor | 2.19 | -1.27 | -18.86 | $p < .05$ |

It should be noted that the National Semiconductor advertisement was perceived as more humorous and more serious than the Newsline ad.

As have many of the past studies on humor and recall, no difference in the subjects' ability to recall copy points was found between the humorous and serious messages (TABLE 2).

Table 2: Recall of the Message

| | Experimental Group-Humorous Ad | Control Group-Serious Ad | t | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newsline | 8.84 | 8.73 | -.20 | n.s. |
| National Semiconductor | 10.95 | 11.18 | .28 | n.s. |

With regard to credibility significant differences between groups were found. The serious version of the Newsline and the National Semiconductor ads were rated more credible than the humorous versions. (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Perceived Credibility of the Message

| | Experimental Group-Humorous Ad | Control Group-Serious Ad | t | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newsline | 37.86 | 39.97 | 1.86 | $p < .05$ |
| National Semiconductor | 39.30 | 41.86 | 2.07 | $p < .05$ |

Table 4 shows the humorous messages were also judged to have less authority.

TABLE 4: Perceived Authority of the Message

| | Experimental Group-Humorous Ad | Control Group-Serious Ad | t | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newsline | 19.87 | 21.77 | 2.86 | $p < .05$ |
| National Semiconductor | 20.24 | 23.26 | 3.78 | $p < .05$ |

Table 5 shows there were no differences between the messages in character.

TABLE 5: Perceived Character of the Message

| | Experimental Group-Humorous Ad | Control Group-Serious | t | Significance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newsline | 17.97 | 18.21 | .41 | n.s. |
| National Semiconductor | 19.06 | 18.60 | -.83 | n.s. |

## CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that the use of a humorous approach in advertising has certain inherent dangers. The evidence from this study and from past studies on humor and recall suggest that at best the advertiser can expect no difference in recall of his message whether he uses a serious or humorous approach. Humor may attract attention and hold the audience, but the audience of a humorous message is not more likely to recall the message than the audience of a serious message. Likewise, serious messages are likely to be judged more credible and to have more authority than humorous messages. Thus advertisers seeking credibility

and authority should avoid humorous messages. One reason often given for using humor is that it creates a relaxed, positive mood which will improve liking for the product. Results of this study suggest that humorous advertising may not create such a mood any more than a serious approach.

While humor may be a useful approach for low involvement advertising where recall of specific product features may not be so important or in the case of image advertising, advertisers should be careful in selecting a humorous approach.

## FUTURE RESEARCH

There is an obvious need for further research on the effectiveness of humor in advertising. This experimental analysis of humor is like so many studies that utilize available university students seated in a classroom. The external validity of the study is subject to serious question. More externally valid studies are needed. Similarly, the results of the various studies yield conflicting results and direction for advertisers. More work needs to be done on resolving those issues.

Further research also needs to be done manipulating the medium and the type of product. The medium, the product and humor may interact to influence recall, credibility, authority, character and other message effects variables.

Humor is widely used in advertising, and yet without more research, the use of humor continues to be a risky decision. As Chevins ( 1981 p. 22 ) points out, "Even though you are much more likely to hit a home run with humor, it's also much easier to strike out."

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